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## "Mystery at the Lilacs" (1938): Elizabeth Bowen's Thriller Serial for *Home and Country*

### Introduction

In the summer of 1938, *Home and Country*, the monthly organ of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI), ran a three-part serial called 'Mystery at the Lilacs'. The June edition of 'Home and Country' advertises the story on its front cover; a modest insert on the top left-hand corner promises 'MYSTERY AT THE LILACS A NEW THRILLER' as well as advertising a photographic competition 'with prizes' and a column called 'Helps for Housewives'. The contents page of the journal reveals the author of this serial is Elizabeth Bowen and that it has been 'Specially Written for "Home and Country"'. 'Mystery at the Lilacs' is not included in any volume of Bowen's stories collected during her lifetime or subsequently, and nor does it feature in Sellery and Harris's bibliography of Bowen's works.<sup>1</sup> Allan Hepburn, whose valuable work on Bowen's short fiction, essays and radio broadcasts means we now have access to much previously uncollected material, points out that '[O]wing to indifference or forgetfulness, [Bowen] omitted at least twenty-eight tales from the books of short fiction that she assembled over the course of her career.'<sup>2</sup> Authorial indifference aside, the obscurity of the *Home and Country* journal and the lack of correspondence relating to this story in Bowen's papers make it unsurprising it has resisted re-discovery.<sup>3</sup>

Bowen's contribution to *Home and Country* is less surprising when we know of her commitment to the Women's Institute (WI) during the interwar period. That the story was 'specially written for "Home and Country"' informs the approach of this article, which seeks to situate this serial within the periodical culture of the journal, paying particular attention to Bowen's engagement with the social and cultural debates that played out across its pages. I also consider how Bowen's serial compares with her other contemporary literary projects. Far from being an aberration or curiosity, this serial overlaps thematically with Bowen's other interwar short stories. Self-reflexively concerned with the status of the writer in the community and preoccupied with the relationship between high and popular culture, 'Mystery at the Lilacs' has much to tell us about Bowen's thinking at this late

modernist moment. Before turning to an analysis of the serial itself, the following two contextual sections will introduce the WI and *Home and Country*, commenting on Bowen's relationship to the organisation and its broader institutional values and politics during this period.

### Elizabeth Bowen and the WI

I hope you'll have a nice afternoon with the Women's Institute, or as we used to call it when I was in the Headington one, the *W.I.* I expect the *W.I.* will have a nice time anyway. As a matter of fact I do very much miss *W.I.s*: since I came to live in London I feel I don't live in England at all.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen's passion for 'W.I.s' is evident in this striking 1941 letter to Virginia Woolf, herself an, albeit, reluctant recruit to the movement.<sup>5</sup> Bowen's appeal to the collective 'we' of the Headington branch of which she was formerly a member and her confident use of the acronym, *W.I.*, show her at home with the organisation and there is something bordering on the disciplinary in the correction she offers Woolf – 'W.I.' not 'Women's Institute' – that marks Bowen out as an insider, and one with a keen sense of protocol.

This was most certainly the case. Bowen was active in her local WI in Headington, Oxford where she lived for ten years from 1925, while her husband held the role of Secretary for Education. Susan Buchan, another local resident and enthusiastic WI member, remembers meeting Bowen in the late twenties at the committee of the Oxfordshire Federation of WIs - by this time Bowen was President of her branch.<sup>6</sup> This letter to Woolf registers a complex identification with the organisation that goes beyond simple gung-ho enthusiasm. It is full of the feelings of nostalgia and longing that recur throughout Bowen's correspondence with Woolf during this period.<sup>7</sup> This form of homesickness is ideologically charged and Bowen's characterization of England in terms of 'feeling' may be read in the context of her status as an Anglo-Irish writer. Hermione Lee comments convincingly on Bowen's 'ambivalent' relationship to England and her 'discontinuous' relationship to Ireland, both resulting in a 'sense of dislocation and alieness'.<sup>8</sup> Lee also points to the imaginative freedom Bowen identified with the English countryside and Declan Kiberd suggests: 'The ambivalence felt by Bowen towards the English is, in the end,

based on an outraged conviction that only the Anglo-Irish had, in the twentieth century, the courage still to live the myth of a traditional England.<sup>9</sup> For Bowen the WI, with its patriotic and preservationist instincts, represented part of this myth.

In fact, the Women's Institute Movement was a Canadian import brought to Great Britain in 1915 with the twin aims of 'stimulating interest in the agricultural industry' and 'providing centres for educational and social intercourse' for rural women.<sup>10</sup> Due to its appearance during a moment of national crisis, the WI was established along patriotic and nationalist lines – as is clear in its motto 'For Home and Country' – and historian Maggie Andrews notes that the WI encouraged the association of rural women with a certain authentically English way of life.<sup>11</sup> What we encounter in Bowen's letter to Woolf (and indeed in her serial) is a striking articulation of the WI's ideology, particularly its investment in a model of Englishness that is synonymous with the countryside.<sup>12</sup>

There are further political reasons why the WI may have been an attractive, even comforting, figure for Bowen at this moment. With her 'belief in the moral effects of property, in benevolent imperialism, in tradition' Bowen was 'a recognizable type of conservative'.<sup>13</sup> Alan Sinfield identifies her apprehensiveness about the language of class-consciousness and the project of welfare-capitalism that emerged during WWII with the 'panic of literary intellectuals in the face of the postwar state'.<sup>14</sup> Her attitude towards a potential post-war Labour government in a 1945 letter to William Plomer is striking evidence of this: "'when Mr Churchill goes, I go". I can't stick all these little middle-class Labour wets with their Old London School of Economics ties and their women.'<sup>15</sup> While the WI prided itself on its egalitarianism and non-denominationalism,<sup>16</sup> in practice traditional hierarchies of class and influence informed its institutional structure: leaders, certainly at county federation and national level but also often at individual institute level, were drawn from the middle and upper classes.<sup>17</sup> The WI's project of class conciliation, most powerfully served by its rule prohibiting the discussion of any controversial or political topics,<sup>18</sup> has been read as a means of heading off the politicisation of working-class rural communities and the spread of left-wing politics.<sup>19</sup>

Bowen's anxiety about the increasing democratization of society mean she would likely have sympathised with the NFWI approach to these matters and it is

suggestive that in the midst of the war Bowen looks to the WI for solace. Given the powerful grip the organisation held on Bowen's imagination it is less surprising than it might first appear that she should have put her skill and status as a writer to effective use by contributing an original serial to the WI magazine, *Home and Country*.

### *Home and Country*

The first number of *Home and Country*, published in February 1919, was a modest affair: 3,000 copies were printed and each was just eight-pages long.<sup>20</sup> For an institutional publication, it proved a successful enterprise, with circulation growing to 50,000 by 1927.<sup>21</sup> WI historian, Inez Jenkins, is, however, equivocal about the content of early issues, especially its 'first excursions into the realms of fiction and verse'.<sup>22</sup> Literary content seems to have posed a problem for the editorial board, with serials proving a particular sticking point.<sup>23</sup> The minutes of the *Home and Country* Editorial Committee from 1920-1925 show resistance to regular proposals for a serial. In November 1920: 'It was recommended that owing to lack of space it was impossible to publish a serial in "Home and Country"'.<sup>24</sup> Given the rapid growth of the paper – Jenkins notes that by the end of the year it had 'doubled in size and almost trebled in circulation' – this excuse is not altogether convincing.<sup>25</sup> The following year in July 1921 the minutes state:

MRS BURTON FENNING proposed that a serial be published. It was DECIDED that undoubtedly a serial would be popular with W.I. members. Lady Isobel Margesson promised to interview publishers with a view to finding out the feasibility of obtaining a serial on advantageous terms.<sup>26</sup>

The need for the serial to be secured on 'advantageous terms' implies that the committee's reticence was based on financial concerns. This reluctance was perhaps also linked to periodical temporality: how would a serial work in a monthly journal like *Home and Country*? Its status as an organisational publication, with the primary aim of informing members about WI news, may also have had something to do with the lack of enthusiasm for a serial. The prominence of regular articles on issues of

domestic economy suggest that that *Home and Country* conceived of itself as a service publication, not unlike the tranche of women's magazines to be launched later in the interwar period.<sup>27</sup>

The sentence that follows in the minutes suggests the committee's resistance might have had another source too: 'As an alternative the publication of a classic, such as, "The Three Musketeers", was recommended'.<sup>28</sup> The use of popularity and classic and their proximity here are suggestive of anxieties about taste. Reading *Home and Country's* editorial decisions in the context of the burgeoning culture of women's magazines and periodicals in the interwar period is revealing in this regard.<sup>29</sup> As Billie Melman notes: 'The relation between the role of magazine fiction and the social status of the magazine-reading public has been noticed. The space given to fiction was in inverse proportion to the class of readers. The 'higher' this class, the smaller the story component'.<sup>30</sup> The pointed class associations of the serial genre are significant for our purposes: 'The serial story was peculiar to working-class periodicals [...] Middle-class publications, on the other hand, had a distinct preference for shorter fiction'.<sup>31</sup>

This preference is reflected in the *Home and Country* minutes. In July 1921: 'The Editor reported there were many requests for a serial. It was recommended that a serial was undesirable in a monthly magazine but that short stories or talks on foreign countries should appear when possible'.<sup>32</sup> The editorial committee's reluctance to include a serial and their preference for short fiction reads as evidence of an awareness of the hierarchical character of different publications' literary output. The struggle over a serial here also takes place in the context of the NFWI's educational mission. The idea that 'talks on foreign countries' could take the place of a serial suggests a preference for 'improving' reading.<sup>33</sup>

The minutes go quiet on the subject of serials until July 1925 by which time the opinion of the committee has softened: 'It was reported that Mr Buchan regretted that he was unable to write a serial as requested by the committee'. Having received John Buchan's regrets the committee approached another well-known literary supporter of the WI and this time were successful: 'It was reported that E. M. Dellafield [*sic*] has consented to write a serial for the first six months of

1926 at a fee of £25. The Editor was directed to write and thank Miss Dellafield [*sic*] for her generous offer.<sup>34</sup>

Delafield's 1926 contribution, 'A Golden Celebration', was followed by offerings from other respected middlebrow writers and the serial becomes a regular feature of *Home and Country*. Naomi Mitchison contributed a twelve-part historical serial for 1929, and in 1930 H S Reid wrote another twelve-part serial, this time a lyrical drama about a rural working family called 'Thel'.<sup>35</sup> *Home and Country* were clearly commissioning serials by middlebrow writers well known for their contributions to higher-end periodicals and magazines, including *Time and Tide*. While *Time and Tide*, which courted a self-consciously modern and professional readership and self-defined as an 'overtly feminist review of politics and the arts',<sup>36</sup> appealed to a different type of middle-class woman to *Home and Country*, the overlap in their contributors is worth noting. It gives some traction to Catherine Clay's argument for greater attention to be paid to points of exchange and correspondence between feminist periodicals and the expanding women's magazine market, often read as mutually opposed.<sup>37</sup> *Home and Country's* relationship with these women writers also reveals something of their ambitions for the culture of the journal and the class of reader they anticipated and actively sought. Any anxiety about the class associations of the serial form was neutralised when penned by one of these recognised and respectable middlebrow writers.

The subtextual concern with taste and literary hierarchies that appears to have motivated *Home and Country's* editorial decisions is also present, in a playful incarnation, in Bowen's 'Mystery at the Lilacs'. Bowen was an energetic contributor of articles to a range of periodicals and magazines. Lee describes some of this journalism as 'routine' in order to distinguish it from her more absorbing literary pursuits: 'Bowen contributed to magazines as diverse as the *Listener* and *Vogue*, the *New Statesman* and *Mademoiselle*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and *House and Garden*, with easy-going facility'.<sup>38</sup> There are also short stories that were produced in the same spirit; as Alan Hepburn notes, Bowen wrote short stories to commission throughout the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> 'Brigands', an adventure story featuring two child-sleuths, was written for a 1932 volume of children's stories collected by Celia Asquith, while 'The Unromantic Princess', a satirical take on the fairy tale, was published in a 1935

collection to raise funds for the Princess Elizabeth of York Hospital for Children.<sup>40</sup> Bowen's willingness to write to demand and in the service of good causes casts light on her contribution to *Home and Country*. 'Mystery at the Lilacs' – which appeared in three two-page instalments totalling about 2000 words in all – falls into this lighter category of Bowen's literary production while still retaining glimmers of the elegant but twisty style Bowen cultivated in her novels and interwar stories.

### 'Mystery at the Lilacs'

Set in the sleepy fictional village of 'Sutton Plover', 'Mystery at the Lilacs' includes many of the staples of Bowen's interwar rural short fiction – a long-vacant house around which the action of the story turns, a complacent village community that bears witness and is gently satirised and an adolescent girl protagonist. Veronica Philbeam is one of a few 'unsettled' young people who do not recognize their good fortune in living in Sutton Plover. When Veronica is not 'practising the piano, or helping, as was proper, her kind uncle and aunt, she would bicycle round the country, simply looking for trouble'. The narrator takes a rather dim view of her: 'a romantic girl, always hoping something would happen'.<sup>41</sup> During the course of the serial a number of things happen: Veronica uncovers not one, but two mysteries.

The first concerns the new tenants of the long-vacant eponymous cottage, The Lilacs: Mrs Clarke-Moberly (Mrs C-M), a colourfully-dressed eccentric, and her nephew, Denis. After observing Denis with a 'wicked-looking revolver' and discovering Mrs C-M has disappeared, leaving The Lilacs in a state of disarray, Veronica turns sleuth and uncovers a web of deception. Mrs C-M is in fact Lucinda Bradnitt, a novelist researching a detective novel in Sutton Plover where she hopes to observe human nature unspoilt by 'books, or the movies'. Her peculiar behavior and staged disappearance on the day of Lady Hammer's fete are a 'colossal stunt' designed to provoke 'authentic' reactions in the villagers for her to study. After Mrs C-M fails to meet Denis at their appointed rendez-vous, Veronica discovers the novelist hiding on Lord Hammer's estate and in doing so unearths a second intrigue.<sup>42</sup> It transpires that Lord Hammer also hides 'a shocking literary secret'.<sup>43</sup> Writing under the nom du plume Antrobus Grey, he is responsible for a scandalous roman-à-clef based on the Sutton Plover gentry called *Secrets of the Shires* - a source



of much local gossip. Mrs C-M knows this, as they share the same publisher, and has blackmailed Lord Hammer into bringing her daily reports of the village reaction to her disappearance, while concealing her on his estate. All this deception is however swiftly forgiven and the serial concludes with Denis and Veronica's engagement and Mrs C-M announcing: 'Well, that all fits in quite nicely, you have my blessing. I meant my detective story to end with a romance'.<sup>44</sup>

Bowen's serial is nothing if not eventful. It is also at every stage characterised by a certain knowingness and self-reflexivity; it is interested in the author's place in the community and Bowen wears her debts to romance and thriller genres on her sleeve throughout. The ironic play of the serial represents its key appeal but also its singular challenge; it is difficult to work out to whom its many nods and winks are directed or to discover the intended subjects of Bowen's various satirical swipes. The following discussion will suggest a number of ways into the serial that might cast light on these issues and uncover some of the political imperatives of the story, which are not necessarily obvious on first reading.

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A number of Bowen's thirties' stories, including 'The Cat Jumps' and 'Look At All Those Roses!', reveal her familiarity with the conventions of suspense and thriller genres. As Hepburn has noted, Bowen was an avid reader of detective fiction and a habitual viewer of 'cinematic thrillers' throughout this period.<sup>45</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs' includes gestures to both forms. Bowen's sleuth-heroine Veronica Philbeam's surname is a single letter off that of Nova Pilbeam, a British actress who starred in films throughout the 1930s, including two Hitchcock thrillers, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *Young and Innocent* (1937). It is unlikely the closeness to Pilbeam's name is a coincidence, and it can be read as a deliberate nod to the Hitchcockian thriller. Bowen had her own connection with Hitchcock as Billy Buchan, son of John and Susan Buchan and aspiring filmmaker, was lodged with Bowen and her husband in 1935 while completing an apprenticeship with Hitchcock at Lime Grove Studios.<sup>46</sup>

In keeping with the genre's own tendency to 'knowing internal reference to other crime fiction', Bowen also gestures to contemporary detective fiction in her serial.<sup>47</sup> The woman writer of detective novels is a familiar character deployed by a number of the so-called 'Queens of Crime' in their interwar fiction. By making this figure central to the action of her serial, Bowen announces herself in dialogue with these popular writers.<sup>48</sup> Agatha Christie's Ariadne Oliver, sometime sidekick to Hercule Poirot, is an eccentric writer of popular detective fiction who frequently derails Poirot's cases. Less satirical is Dorothy L Sayers's rendering of Harriet Vane, who appears in a number of her Peter Wimsey series in the 1930s. As Cora Kaplan notes, Sayers uses Vane to articulate her ambitions for the genre and in doing so: 'inaugurates an explicit, extended discussion [...] of the relationship between women's status, sexual mores, and literary hierarchies.'<sup>49</sup> Bowen also uses her thriller serial, and particularly the figure of the woman writer, to explore questions concerning literary value.

Bowen may have had a real-life writer, of a rather different kind of fiction, in mind when creating Mrs C-M/Lucinda Bradnitt. There are aspects of this character that recall Bowen's friend, Virginia Woolf. Mrs C-M's eccentric dress, her 'long, horsey face' and her nervous temperament may be read as allusions to Woolf, who had gained a certain degree of notoriety, due to the popular success of *Orlando* and *The Years*. Lee suggests that by 1928 Woolf 'was justified in thinking herself famous', attracting (often unwelcome) interest from journalists and being 'profiled and featured' in the press.<sup>50</sup> The parallels between her appearance – her equine features and distinctive dress – and Mrs C-M's may have registered with WI readers.

Mrs C-M's decorative innovations at The Lilacs, including the 'bright, modernistic colours'<sup>51</sup> in the sitting room and the 'lime-yellow'<sup>52</sup> chosen for the outside of the house, recall the striking colours Woolf chose for Monk's House, where Bowen had such fond memories of visiting. There is little chance readers of *Home and Country* would have known the colour of Woolf's sitting room and this gesture is perhaps better read as a private tribute to Woolf or simply as testimony to the imaginative significance Monk's House held for Bowen. The telling use of 'modernistic' in the description of Mrs C-M's home and the presentation of her

artistic values in the serial do, however, suggest Bowen intended to make a satirical point about the modernist literary scene.

Take Denis's account of his Aunt's response to her publisher's proposal she write a detective novel:

Well, Aunt Pauline was hugely taken by the idea, but she has always rather despised detective stories because she says their psychology is so unsound. She says all the people in them behave, react, so *unnaturally*. She said she couldn't reconcile it with her literary conscience to write a detective story in which even the minor characters did not behave just as they would in real life.<sup>53</sup>

Lucinda Bradnitt's contempt for detective fiction appears to be modelled on a certain version of highbrow elitism in currency during the interwar period and with which Woolf was identified.<sup>54</sup> The excessive use of 'despised' and later the pompous reference to the 'unsound psychology' of 'detective stories' have the ring of mock highbrow pronouncements of literary judgement and expose the satirical impulse at work in Bowen's rendering of Bradnitt. That this account is reported through her nephew Denis's uncritical and adoring eyes makes this parody on modernist pretension, here cast as earnest 'literary conscience', all the more apparent.

Matters are complicated by the fact that in some ways Bowen can herself be read as a model for Bradnitt. Like Woolf, Bowen was well known for her striking, horse-like features and she also shared Bradnitt's penchant for alter egos. Victoria Glendinning remarks on Bowen's preference for being known socially as 'Mrs Cameron', her married name, and the comic misunderstandings this sometimes gave rise to.<sup>55</sup> As president of her local WI, Bowen went by Elizabeth Cameron, so something of Bradnitt's role as the disguised novelist in the English village recalls Bowen's own situation in Headington. This reveals a self-reflexive humour at work in her portrait of a woman writer of psychological novels holidaying not only in the English countryside but also in detective fiction, as Bowen wrote 'Mystery at the Lilacs' the same year her novel, *The Death of the Heart*, was published. Focusing on vulnerable teenager Portia Quayne as she attempts to navigate the callous world of

her older half-brother and his wife, the novel is an intensely observed portrait of adolescent development and disappointment and one in which Bowen is concerned with the 'psychology' of human interactions.

*The Death of the Heart* also features two, quite differently modelled novelist characters – St Quentin, perceptive but detached, 'vaguely post-Jamesian', and Eddie, a selfish and superficial author of a 'satirical *roman-a-clef*' on London social circles he is now ostracised from.<sup>56</sup> With its minute interest in conveying the limitations of human relationships, particularly the failure of empathy and imagination on the part of these two novelist characters, *The Death of the Heart* casts light on 'Mystery at the Lilacs'. In her serial Bowen treats playfully the serious questions raised by her novel of the same year. Both reflect her interest in the status of the writer in the community and their responsibilities as social observers.

Bowen's characterisation of Lucinda Bradnitt and her lofty authorial ambitions can then be interpreted as not just self-reflexive but self-satirical. Perhaps Bowen's aim was to ingratiate herself to her readers by mocking highbrows in a middlebrow journal, while at once distancing herself from literary 'pretensions' of the day. But Bowen's portrait of the out-of-touch 'psychological' novelist is edged with anxiety. Written three years after her move back to London from Headington, 'Mystery at the Lilacs' encodes some of the concerns at play in Bowen's wistful 1941 letter to Woolf expressing her homesickness for WIs. Lucinda Bradnitt's failure to understand the 'real' character(s) of Sutton Plover perhaps speaks to Bowen's own feelings of unease in London and her fears of losing touch with village life, of really turning into the complacent writers she depicts in her 1938 fiction.

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That is one way of reading Bowen's depiction of village life and the woman writer. However, Bowen's representation of Sutton Plover is not conditioned only by her own feelings of nostalgia or longing. In an article on 'The Poetics of House and Home in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen', Elke D'hoker foregrounds Bowen's own 'profoundly middle-class experiences in England' as important contexts for her fictional houses.<sup>57</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs' supports D'hoker's assessment but also

clarifies the need for special attention to be paid to the rural settings of Bowen's interwar stories. Bowen's 'middle-class experiences in England' were also to a significant degree middle-class experiences of *rural* England, and the following section will explore the broader social and political significance of Bowen's representation of English village life in 'Mystery at the Lilacs'.

Take the serial's opening:

There was considerable excitement in Sutton Plover when the news came that The Lilacs was really let. The house had been standing empty for some time, ever since the death of Mrs Petersen, and people felt its emptiness was a slight on the village. When the agent's boards with "To Be Let or Sold" had first gone up, quite a number of people came from a distance to look over it, and the Sutton Plover people felt both annoyed and disappointed when nothing came of any of these visits.<sup>58</sup>

The narrative is provincial in its outlook. This is clear from what is included in this opening paragraph and what is not. While Mrs Petersen's death is treated cursorily in parenthetical commas - the reader left to assume she is The Lilacs' former owner - the narrator records the exact wording of the house agent's sign. Narrative detail appears to be driven and delimited by the interests of 'Sutton Plover People'. The suggestive lack of specificity that characterises the initial flurry of viewers of the house, coming from 'quite a distance', also reveals the Sutton Plover point of view, sounding like a comment based on hearsay or even registering a complacent lack of interest in anywhere else but Sutton Plover.

This localism is apparent throughout part one of 'Mystery at the Lilacs'. After a long appraisal of the house itself the village is described in loving detail:

Certainly, Sutton Plover was pretty quiet, but only a fool would call it out of the world: it was four and a half miles from the railway station, but a bus ran twice daily in and out of Barleigh, with an extra service on market days. And once at Barleigh you were on the main line to London – except for two changes, and the connections were excellent. And if life did not change much

in the village it was because everybody showed good sense and stayed where they were: they knew where they were well off. Sutton Plover was set in pretty, unspoilt country; fine hunting country, too – but The Lilacs had no stabling.<sup>59</sup>

This defensive account of Sutton Plover's amenity verges on spoof. The proximity of the train station, the regularity of busses into Barleigh and the ease of access to the 'main line to London' are the features of a village that its local middle-class would consider advantageous and indeed the serial pointedly ventriloquises this kind of voice. This passage is also self-contradictory in obvious ways and ones that are less so. The details of the route to London are confusing and the narrator does not appear entirely at ease with the infrastructural developments they boast about. There is a breathless quality to the writing, the consecutive sentences beginning with 'And' read as an attempt to check interruption or criticism. The staunch conservatism of the line, 'And if life did not change much in the village it was because everybody showed good sense and stayed where they were: they knew where they were well off', appears at odds with the gesture to mobility found in the references to the bus and train.

The class politics of the passage are also worthy of attention. The middle-class, local voice Bowen adopts gives us a clue as to whom she thinks she is writing for. The reference to the Lilacs' sad lack of stabling and later allusions to the difficulty of finding reliable servants in the countryside, suggest it is not the WI's working-class members who Bowen imagined as her readership, but rather the middle-class gentry who she came into contact with at county federation meetings in her role as president of her local WI. It is difficult to tell whether Bowen is giving these middle-class readers what she believes they want. Is it the frisson of seeing their interests reflected in the serial even if these are being gently made fun of? These are questions I will return to, if not necessarily resolve, towards the close of this article.

Through the closing invocation of 'unspoilt country' Bowen situates her serial in relation to interwar debates about rural preservation.<sup>60</sup> 'Mystery at The Lilacs' can be read as a parable on these contemporary questions of preservation and

adaptation. Her approach appears to be gently mocking of assumptions on both sides. Through Mrs C-M and Denis, she probes popular anxieties about urban 'newcomers'<sup>61</sup> invading the countryside. Mrs C-M's ostentatiously double-barreled name appears to identify her with an intrusive modernity as 'Moberly' aurally recalls her mobility and her oft-referenced motor-car. She certainly brings with her a set of metropolitan values and tastes that contrast with those of Sutton Plover. In Part One, Bowen draws out the comic potential of the interactions between newcomers and village:

To most people in Sutton Plover her appearance, though rather striking, was soon familiar. She wore bright, decided colours, got in and out of her car with great energy, had a long, horsey face and a large mouth, wore rimless pince-nez and ear-rings, and talked most freely and emphatically to everybody she met. She seemed to enjoy being an object of interest, which, given the unmasked interest the village showed in her doings, was just as well.<sup>62</sup>

The narrator captures a tone of suppressed judgment, most notable in the moderate tone of the first line, significantly referring to 'most' and not 'all' 'people in Sutton Plover'. Given the prim account of Mrs C-M's appearance as 'rather striking' and the equivocal use of 'familiar' we can assume it is the local gentry who have managed to suppress their interest in or consternation at The Lilacs' new tenant. These are perhaps the same restrained locals who notice the 'rough and ready' nature of the decoration of the house 'but reserved their judgment'. A note of distaste is also discernable in the closing reference to the village's (as opposed to the gentry's) 'unmasked interest' in Mrs C-M's doings.

If this story of Londoners invading the countryside allows Bowen to send up rural fears about the threat of urban creep, it also allows her to mock a metropolitan view of the countryside and urban self-satisfaction. Mrs C-M and Denis's patronizing 'psychological' experiment is a complete bungle and Denis ends up having to rely on Veronica to sort it out. With her sense of mystery and awareness that all is not what it seems, Veronica is quite the opposite of the 'natural' rural personality, 'unspoilt' by modern values or 'books' and 'movies'.<sup>63</sup> The no-nonsense narrative voice of the

serial, with its keen eye for detail, also shows up the pair's assumptions about 'Sutton Plover people', and the joke is really shown to be on them. The village is occupied with its own, far more absorbing, scandal: the true identity of Antrobus Grey is the only source of gossip at Lady Hammer's 'Shilling tea'.<sup>64</sup>

The gentle satire of 'Mystery at the Lilacs' appears then to be evenly distributed and the serial refuses to give up its sympathies easily. Read in the immediate context of the issues of *Home and Country* in which it appeared brings its commitments into sharper focus. A number of things suggest Bowen was familiar with *Home and Country's* thematic preoccupations and the kind of material her serial might appear alongside in summer issues of the journal. For instance, the July issue that includes part two of the serial, featuring the shilling tea in Lord and Lady Hammer's estate, boasts a feature on 'Summer-time Tea Dainties'.<sup>65</sup> The final installment of 'Mystery at the Lilacs' in the August issue appears two pages before an article called 'The Child on Holiday', which offers advice on how to keep children occupied and out of trouble during the long summer break. It begins: 'To slack about at home without any definite object in view, to lie in bed late, to eat all kinds of indigestible things, to go to unsuitable, highly exciting film performances is no good holiday for any child'.<sup>66</sup> While I do not suggest that Bowen knew the exact content her story would share the space of the journal with, that this po-faced article should feature alongside the final installment of the serial shows the degree to which Bowen engagement with domestic life and family values in 'Mystery at the Lilacs' lined up with WI values as they were expressed in its journal. The forthright and disapproving tone of this piece recalls the narrator's view of Veronica's pursuit of romance and mystery and both serial and article register, albeit in different ways, an interwar anxiety about the teenager – an early incarnation of the moral panic that would take hold after WWII.<sup>67</sup> The deracinated, alienated adolescent is a recurring figure in Bowen's fiction of the period. Positioning 'Mystery at the Lilacs' alongside *Home & Country* articles reveals Bowen's familiarity and sympathy with bread and butter WI concerns.

Bowen's other 1930s rural short fiction casts light on the cultural and political values of her serial. These are stories of uneasy leave-taking. In 'The Last Night in the Old Home' (1934), a family reunite to say a tense goodbye to their rural home. The



packed-up house is 'reigned by an unnatural silence' and the narrative dwells on the trappings of an upper-middle-class home – 'the cuckoo-clock', 'the big chintz chairs rumpled by dogs' and, in a sinister turn, the 'mincing machine' in the kitchen - ready to be auctioned the following day. In a parodic ritual 'family letters – from school, from London, from India' are read aloud and then burnt.<sup>68</sup> Only the best ones are kept, mainly those written by a dead son, Adrian. Siblings Henry and Delia, we are told, ambiguously, 'felt home had lasted a day too long' (374), while their brother John resents the reasonable rationale for the sale of the house: 'the old place had no place now they were all grown up and there were no grandchildren [...] their parents would do much better out of this valley climate' (373). The jarring repetition of place, meaning two different things, both a physical location and its role or function, registers the story's interest in displacement, and a particularly middle-class experience of deracination; John fears his parents will become 'people in a hotel' (372). References to Adrian's death and the absence of grandchildren to populate the house, hint at an anxiety about the decline of the middle-class and with it their stake and status in traditional rural life. The abrupt conclusion of the story leaves this anxiety only half articulated:

A wind came up; creepers began to tap on the south windows; draughts crept through the house, fluttering here and there a ticket on objects already bespoken. A door slammed upstairs. Henry went to shut the windows; the rocking-horse was still rocking. A straw from some packing-case blew past his feet in the dark, which was melodramatic. (374)

Just when the sinister potential of the house is about to be realised, the story cuts itself off with this turn to Henry's no-nonsense point of view, the very point of view that endorsed the sale of the house and appears immune to any of its romantic appeal. It is unclear how far Bowen invites us to sympathize with this attitude and to reflect on the melodramatic excesses of the story at its conclusion, or whether this matter-of-fact conclusion actually redoubles the pathos of the family's leave-taking.

Other stories explore the social dislocation of various kinds of newcomers to the countryside. 'Attractive Modern Homes' (1936) charts the existential crisis

experienced by housewife, Mrs Watson, when she and her family move from the community 'where they were born and known' to a half-built, semi-rural housing estate. As with John in 'The Last Night in the Old Home', Mrs Watson's unease is first piqued by the way 'her things appeared uneasy in the new home' (521). Her 'sulky' furniture mirrors her own feelings of dissatisfaction with the estate: 'An estate is not like a village; it has no heart; even the shops are new and still finding their own feet' (522). Most alarming to Mrs Watson is the lack of convention or precedent on an estate, entirely populated by 'newcomers': 'No one asked her in for a cup of tea [...] or even offered a cup over the fence. Where she came from, it had been customary to do this for newcomers' (522). So much does her alienated life on the estate press on Mrs Watson that one Saturday afternoon, after eight weeks in her new home, she lies face down on the wet, leafy floor of the wood that edges the estate. Mrs Watson's reply to her husband's panicky demand for her to pull herself together is a disdainful swipe at the utopian ambitions of modern housing projects, such as the one where she lives: 'This place isn't anywhere' (526). Although the story ends on a more positive note, with Mrs Watson striking up a wary acquaintanceship with her neighbor, Mrs Dawkins, the at once manicured and platitudinous nature of their exchange implies the socially and morally insubstantial character of the estate.

A similarly soulless, this time upmarket, housing estate is one of the rural settings of Bowen's 1935 story, 'The Disinherited'. The story also takes in a squalid 'love-nest' bungalow, a dilapidated stately home and a village manor house that looks like the 'frontispiece to a ghost-story' (177). These spaces are inhabited, variously, by feckless retired civil servants in search of the good life, incognito murderers and impoverished aristocrats. Hermione Lee has noted the significance of these locales to the story's 'powerful satire on middle class life in the 1930s' and they have much to tell us about the place of the rural in Bowen's imagination during the interwar period.<sup>69</sup> These spaces are compromised versions of a working rural community – as in the 'exclusive' housing estate where residents are prohibited from hanging out washing and where, we are told, 'there were and would be no shops' (176) – or spaces that are failing in their role in that community – as in 'Lord Thingummy's' country pile which is left to decay, unvisited by its owner because 'the very thought of the place had been too damp for him' (389). The changing character

of rural life had a significant thematic hold on Bowen during the interwar period and a particular brand of cultural and political conservatism characterises her bleak vision of a morally compromised and hybridised countryside. Such themes also animate 'Mystery at the Lilacs' but they are treated with a light-hearted defiance that sets her serial apart from these other rural stories.

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For Bowen the changing relationship between the urban and rural was not simply fodder for stories but also a real and (sometimes painful) feature of her own life. As her affiliation to the WI demonstrates, she conceived of herself as a countrywoman and her inheritance of her family's stately home, Bowen's Court, in 1930 intensified this identification with the rural. 'Mystery at the Lilacs' affords us further insight into Bowen's rural imagination. It is marked by the same middle-class anxiety about social change we find in her stories, although this concern is articulated rather differently.

Sutton Plover appears to have held at bay the development that Bowen describes in her other stories. Her narrator's boasts about the village's position in 'unspoilt' country might be read as sending up a particular brand of rural middle-class complacency. Yet celebratory and even valedictory impulses temper the satirical in the serial and this is most apparent in the narrative voice of 'Mystery at the Lilacs'. The first sentences of Bowen's 1940 essay 'The Big House', in which she reflects on the fate of Irish country houses such as her own, recall the embattled tone of her serial:

Big houses in Ireland are, I am told, very isolated. I say 'I am told' because the isolation, or loneliness of my own house is only borne in on me, from time to time, by the exclamations of travellers when they arrive. 'Well,' they exclaim, with a hint of denunciation, 'you are a long way from everywhere!' I suppose I see this the other way round: everywhere seems to have placed itself a long

way from me – if ‘everywhere’ means shopping towns, railway stations or Ireland’s principal through roads.’

The context here is different as Bowen is speaking to Irish rural conditions rather than English ones. But her preference for plain-speaking and direct punctuation – ‘I suppose I see this the other way around: everywhere seems to have placed itself a long way from me’ – and her sniffy skepticism of ‘everywhere’ remind us of the playful but nonetheless staunch parochialism of ‘Sutton Plover people’.

The balance between performativity and sincerity that characterises Bowen’s voice in ‘The Big House’ provides a useful way to understand the satirical dimensions of ‘Mystery at the Lilacs’. The dominance of a certain middle-class narrator is key to the comic turn of the serial, which sends up the village point of view – its impatience with Lady Hammer’s ‘easily-flustered nature’ (279) or its disapproval of the shoddy painting of Mrs C-M’s house - in its own eminently commonsensical voice. Like Bowen’s playful references to detective novels and Hitchcock’s thrillers, her handling of narrative voice is best read as manifesting another kind of in-joke between Bowen and her WI readers, gesturing to their shared frame of reference and re-entrenching their common values. The satire of ‘Mystery at the Lilacs’ is gentle and of the affirmative (even self-satisfied) variety rather than the destabilizing. When the narrator insists, ‘everybody showed good sense and stayed where they were: they knew where they were well off’ (233), it is their bluff informality that is humorous rather than the point they make, which for Bowen and for her WI readers is an admirable, even serious, one. The serial offered Bowen the opportunity to ward off the changes she represents and critiques in her other rural interwar stories and to celebrate the kind of village life she identified with the WI. Bowen might poke fun at traditional WI values of honesty, common sense, and responsibility, but in ‘Mystery at the Lilacs’ she laughs at what she holds sacred and what she feared was under threat in her late inter-war moment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Elizabeth Bowen: A Bibliography*, ed. by J’nan M. Sellery and William O. Harris (Austin: Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin, 1981).

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<sup>2</sup> Hepburn, 'Introduction' to *The Bazaar and Other Stories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> I am very grateful to Allan Hepburn for checking his record of Bowen's correspondence to confirm this.

<sup>4</sup> Falmer, University of Sussex Library Special Collections, MHP, General Correspondence of Virginia Woolf, E. Bowen to V. Woolf, February 1941, SxMs18/1/D/20/1.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Virginia Woolf's activities with the WI see Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 154-206.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 56-7.

<sup>7</sup> Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement in England & Wales & Scotland* (Idbury: Village Press, 1925), pp. 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> This chimes with other interwar groups organisations championing rural values. See Jeremy Burchardt, 'Rethinking the Rural Idyll: The English Rural Community Movement, 1913-26', *Cultural & Social History*, 8 (2011), 73-94. Mark Hussey has written interestingly on Virginia Woolf's ruralism. 'I'd Make It Penal', *The Rural Preservation Movement in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts* (London: Cecil Woolf Publishers, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Backwell, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 20.

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<sup>17</sup> Catriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated Between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women's Organizations in England, 1928-1939', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2009), 411-29 (p. 417).

<sup>18</sup> Take WI President Lady Denman's 1925 ruling that 'neither Bolshevism nor the work of the Fascisti might be discussed in Institutes'. Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement in England & Wales & Scotland*, p. 157. This appears to have been a policy taken seriously by readers of *Home & Country*: the journal minutes report a number of complaints over 'the wording of the notice on the death of Lenin' in their March edition. Chastened, the editorial committee responded by passing a motion: 'That there be more careful avoidance in future of the introduction [...] of comments which are of a controversial nature.' London, The Women's Library at the LSE, Papers of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

<sup>19</sup> See Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 88 and A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 264.

<sup>20</sup> Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales* (OUP: 1953), p. 32

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement in England & Wales & Scotland*, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Given restrictions of space I have chosen to focus on the serials published in *Home and Country*, but it should be noted that from the mid-twenties onwards the range of literary content in the journal diversified. Issues include short comic tales, with titles like 'A Good Dressing Down' (January 1930) or 'Very Smart!' (April 1930). The regular column 'FROM THE PAGES OF GREAT WRITERS' reproduces 'classic' lines from thinkers as diverse as David Hume and Mark Twain and as a matter of course each issue also includes some poetry. Popular choices included, Walter de la Mare, John Masefield, John Clare, and Eleanor Farjeon.

<sup>24</sup> *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

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<sup>25</sup> Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia White, *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

<sup>29</sup> *Home and Country's* status as an organisational publication does set it apart. Its circulation, while impressive for an institutional paper, does not compare with those of contemporary women's magazines or periodicals. Fiona Hackney, 'British Women's Magazines 1919-1939', in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 118. Operating at a distance from the pressures of the marketplace allowed *Home and Country* to keep its price per issue lower than the magazines and reviews aimed at middle-class readers - its price of just '2d' in 1938 is the same as mass-market magazines aimed at a lower-middle and working-class readers. Hackney, 'British Women's Magazines 1919-1939', p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 113.

<sup>31</sup> Melman, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

<sup>33</sup> The role of the WI in public library provision is interesting in this regard. Scott notes: 'They [the County Federations] had also played their part in getting the Library Acts adopted. "I think it was a result of our suggestion that the County Education Committee's Library contained a mass of rubbish," writes a County Federation Secretary to me, "That the Committee appointed a sub-committee to read through all the books we have, and weed out the rubbish!"' This Federation Secretary's repeated use of the term 'rubbish' and her confidence in the WI's powers to 'weed' it out suggest the organisation had a sense of reading that was 'good' and reading that was 'bad'. Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement in England & Wales & Scotland*, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> *Home and Country* Operational Papers, 5FWI/G/2/1.

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<sup>35</sup> Hilda Stewart Reid was a friend of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby and their contemporary at Oxford. Like Mitchison, Reid was well known in the 1930s as an author of historical novels. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship* (1940) (London: Virago, 2012), p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Clay, "'What we might expect – If the Highbrow Weeklies Advertized like the Patent Foods': Time and Tide, Advertising, and the 'Battle of the Brows'" *Modernist Cultures*, 6.1 (2011): 60–95 (p. 61-2).

<sup>37</sup> Clay stakes her claim on the overlap between contributors to *Time and Tide* and *Good Housekeeping*. 'The Woman Journalist', p. 203.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> *The Bazar and Other Stories*, p. 355.

<sup>40</sup> *The Bazar and Other Stories*, pp. 83-98.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Mystery at the Lilacs', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 233.

<sup>42</sup> Bowen, 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 325.

<sup>43</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 326.

<sup>44</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 326.

<sup>45</sup> *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 136.

<sup>46</sup> Hepburn, *Intrigue*, p. 136

<sup>47</sup> Cora Kaplan, "'Queens of Crime": The "Golden Age" of Crime Fiction', in *The History of British Women's Writing*, ed. by Maroula Joannou pp. 144-157 (p. 152).

<sup>48</sup> Frances Iles, another popular 1930s crime writer, includes a woman writer of detective stories in a pivotal role in his 1932 novel *Before the Fact* - it is interesting to note that Frances Iles was pen-name of Anthony Cox, frequent contributor to *Home and Country*.

<sup>49</sup> Kaplan, p. 152. Victoria Stewart makes a similar point, suggesting Sayers uses her detective novels to 'debate the nature of the form' throughout the interwar period. 'Defining Detective Fiction in Interwar Britain', *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945*, 9.1: (2013), 101-18 (p. 103).

<sup>50</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), p. 565.

<sup>51</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 325.

<sup>52</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part One', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 234.



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<sup>53</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 325.

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed account of Woolf's public identification with 'highbrow' culture in the 1920s and 1930s see Melba-Cuddy Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere* (CUP, 2003), pp. 13-33. While detective fiction was often homogenised by its contemporary detractors and positioned at the 'opposite point on the cultural map' to modernist literature, Stewart has shown that 'this separation often proved untenable. Interwar debates about detective fiction were no less vigorous than debates about modernism at the same period and indeed [...] were continuous with them'. p. 102. Therefore to find Bowen exploring modernism's tension with the popular middlebrow and in doing so enacting a muddying of these categories is not as surprising as it may first appear.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 59.

<sup>56</sup> Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Elke D'hoker, 'The Poetics of House and Home in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen', *Orbis Litterarum*, 67 (2012), 267-89 (p. 275).

<sup>58</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part One', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 233.

<sup>59</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part One', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 233.

<sup>60</sup> The interwar years were a period of rapid change in the countryside in which it was "more obviously affected by urban influences than ever before". Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 89. Mounting anxiety about this 'urban creep' into the countryside, in the form of arterial roads and ribbon housing developments, led to the establishment of The Council for the Preservation of Rural England in 1926, a group that campaigned for the preservation of the amenity of the countryside while taking a proactive approach to town and country planning. For more on the activities of the CPRE and the politics of interwar rural preservation, see David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998), pp. 25-61.

<sup>61</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part One', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 234

<sup>62</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part One', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 233.

<sup>63</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, August 1938, 326.

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<sup>64</sup> 'Mystery at the Lilacs: Part Three', *Home and Country*, June 1938, 279.

<sup>65</sup> *Home and Country*, July 1938, 299.

<sup>66</sup> *Home and Country*, August 1938, 338.

<sup>67</sup> Members' letters published in *Home and Country* in the first five months of 1931 under the heading 'Unemployment of Girls' show this is anxiety had class dimension and was linked to concerns about the 'servant question' and the fate of the middle-class home. Two correspondents in January take issue with a letter previous number suggesting the WI support 'Labour Exchanges' in the hope of securing employment for girls. One writes: 'Institutes would be doing a far greater work if they were to use their influence to place girls in service [...] If the Women's Institutes would tackle the serious problem of lack of domestic service they would indeed be living up to their motto.' The other comments: 'Hundreds of nervous breakdowns of thoroughly overworked mothers might be avoided if girls would regard domestic service as amongst the most honorable of the professions.' *Home and Country*, January 1931, 42. While all correspondents are agreed that domestic service is an appropriate and even noble employment for girls, some are alert to the unpleasant realities of domestic service, including the lack of free time to pursue personal interests and demanding mistresses. *Home and Country*, April 1931, 207.

<sup>68</sup> *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 372. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 130.